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ABSTRACT

The professional slant of the program in technical and scientific communication at the University of Minnesota, Saint Paul, is in contrast to the classical liberal arts tradition of academic preparation in the field of communication. The major concern of this program is to provide a curriculum and an advising strategy to make communications study more responsive to the real world of work and to provide students with opportunities for interaction with business and industry. In addition to traditional course offerings, students are required to build their own "technical" electives in such areas as the natural sciences, computer science, engineering, statistics, industrial relations, and so on. The combination of expertise in theoretical approaches to communication and marketable skills, encouraged by this program, makes success in obtaining communications-related positions (such as information specialist, personnel manager, market researcher) much more probable. (KS)

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TYPES OF POSITIONS AVAILABLE IN BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT FOR THE GRADUATE IN COMMUNICATION

by
L. David Schuelke

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TYPES OF POSITIONS AVAILABLE IN BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT FOR THE GRADUATE IN COMMUNICATION

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A technical writer, an environmental impact assessment writer, a training coordinator, an information specialist in a research and development laboratory, a county cooperative extension agent or extension communication specialist, a personnel manager or personnel assistant, an interviewer for an opinion poll, a market researcher, and an abstractor for a technical search service are all positions which may be filled by graduates of collegial programs in communication.

In our program in Technical and Scientific Communication at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, we have 100 undergraduate and graduate students working toward placement in many of the occupational areas listed above.

As might be expected, the "applied" or professional slant of this program has, as its philosophical base, a job-oriented, pragmatic, and professional orientation that is in juxtaposition to what might be seen as the classical "liberal arts" tradition of academic preparation in the field of communication.

As I pointed out in an earlier paper ("Integrating Career Competencies Into The Communication Curriculum," CSSA, April 12, 1975), our concern was to provide a curriculum and advising strategy that would make communication "more responsive to the 'real' world of work," and to provide "student options and opportunities for interaction with business and industry."

Since 1972, the Department has developed ten new courses and re-developed six existing courses. The new course titles are:

1. Scientific and Technical Presentation
2. Organizational Communication, Conflict, and Change
3. American Women as Public Communicators
4. Scientific and Technical Graphics
5. Information Mapping
6. Direction of Training in Business and Industry
7. Transfer of Technology
8. Communication in Technological and Environmental Impact Assessment
9. Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
10. Research in Communication Strategies

We are exploring potential new courses continually, and we are studying the potential of curriculum development in the following areas:

1. Innovation and Organizations
2. Environmental Mediation
3. Computer-Generated Narrative Description Programming
4. Bioscientific Communication
5. Computer Conferencing
6. Administrative Feedback Systems and Decision-making
7. The Delphi Technique

As you may conclude, our approach to curriculum development is flexible and dynamic. As a result, our "regular" or foundation courses in such areas as public speaking, composition, discussion, listening, and humanities and literature have come to be viewed as more open to change and curricular experimentation. The philosophical bases and instructional modes, approaches, and teaching methods in nearly all of our courses have become a focal point for faculty and student discussion and inquiry. The results may be dynamically observed in the vigorous "coffee pot" discussions of the entire field of communication and its relationship to the need of students and potential employers. Many faculty members in the department have been moved from their secure carrels in the "ivory tower" to seek new sources and applications

(both within and outside of academe) for application to classroom instruction, research, and possible placement of graduates.

This "unfreezing" of the curriculum has led to new and sometimes exciting interfaces with business and industry, and working professionals in the field of communication, as well as colleagues in other departments within the University. For example, it has helped to provide the department with nearly $100,000 of new research funds in the past two years, and countless opportunities for faculty consulting, interdisciplinary projects and proposals, as well as the identification of new and existing careers for our graduates.

In addition to the job titles in the introduction of this paper, students and faculty are investigating the possibilities for placement in such careers as:

labor relations assistant
labor negotiator
mediator-arbitrator
ombudsman
consumer information specialist
patient rights advisor
"hotline" manager
publisher's representative
biomedical communication specialist
technical sales representative
technical/scientific secretary
research analyst
financial report writer
public relations writer
environmental writer
government information specialist
public interest group information specialist
legislative aide
job placement interviewer
service representative
law enforcement/corrections officer
social service agency information specialist

Although this list is not exhaustive, it is indicative of the potential application of skills, abilities, and artistic competency that many communication majors already have acquired or could acquire with competent advising

and creative curriculum planning.

I believe that communication curricula need drastic change to provide the foundation that is needed for application by communication graduates.

The traditional communication curriculum is filled with requirements (or limited options) which do not directly relate to many of the careers listed above. In fact, many of our programs have "medicinal" tracks or courses in essentially traditional liberal-arts subject areas that "would be good for the student." "Goodness" here is defined usually in terms of what "every major in our department ought to have;" or something that will provide a student with "good experience" that can be transferred to "any job situation."

Such "foundation" courses may include: Ancient Rhetorical Theory, History and Criticism of Public Address, Phonetics, Oral Interpretation, The Oral Tradition of Literature and Belle Lettres, Introduction to Theatre, Origins of Language, The Anatomy and Physiology of the Vocal Mechanism, History of the Mass Media, Argumentation and Debate.

I have no complaint with any of these course titles or the organization of textual and/or course material into these categories. What I am opposed to is the requirement of such courses at the exclusion of others which may serve the faculty and the students with more direct experience with the world of work in business and government agencies.

If you will reject the argument that we are essentially teaching for "transfer" and that the student should be expected to "synthesize" and apply his or her learning to every situation which he confronts, the fact remains that many communication graduates have skill deficiencies (see Mager and Pipe, Analyzing Performance Problems, Fearon, 1970) when applying for jobs in business and government.

These skill deficiencies need not occur if students are given opportunities to delineate career options early, if advising is career-oriented and competent, and if courses are available both within and outside the department for study in job-related skills.

In addition to our departmental course offerings, we require each student to build his own "technical elective" or area of emphasis outside of the field of communication. A sampling of these areas are as follows:

natural sciences
horticulture
food science and nutrition
animal science
agronomy
forest products and marketing
computer science
ecology and environmental studies
health sciences or public health
engineering
resource and community development
soil science
statistics
design and textiles
family social science
geology
industrial relations

With these individualized technical electives, students develop skills as well as basic theoretical approaches to specific professional fields. The result is that students work for career entry into specific industries and government agencies with communication as their major, and a repertoire of competencies that are in the category of marketable skills as a minor or elective field.

Our approach to the field of communication is ecclectic and dynamic and we have placed a high premium on curricular innovation to meet the changing needs and interests of our students. We have sacrificed a hierarchical or unitary theory of communication education as well as a classical approach to the field. In its place we have built an approach which is futuristic,

change-oriented, audience and message centered, and interdisciplinary. It is too soon to accurately assess the results of this approach. In a world of increasing college graduates and fewer and fewer job opportunities, our graduates appear to be more flexible and yet specifically prepared to meet the demands of business, industry and government.